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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000406

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL, PRM, CA/OCS, S/ES-O

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL SCUL SOCI KIRF VM ETMIN HUMANR

SUBJECT: MFA IN HCMC ASSURES CONGEN SITUATION IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS
NOW STABLE

REF: A) HCMC 0391 B) HANOI 1007 C) HCMC 0401

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Mr. Le Hung Quoc, Senior Deputy Director of the Ho Chi Minh City External Relations Office (ERO), downplayed reports of widespread protests and high casualty numbers in the Central Highlands (refs A and B) during a meeting with Acting Consul General on April 13, assuring her that the situation was now "stable." A/CG utilized the meeting to underscore U.S. interest in the peaceful resolution of the current ethnic unrest in Dak Lak and Gia Lai provinces, and to stress the importance of obtaining both access and accurate information. ConGen and Embassy Poloffs were forced to postpone a planned trip to the Central Highlands on April 10, after violence reportedly broke out during demonstrations by ethnic minority persons ("Montagnards") in the two provinces. The ConGen submitted a diplomatic note to ERO (the southern branch office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) on April 12 to formalize verbal requests for ERO to facilitate a trip to the Central Highlands at the earliest opportunity. Mr. Quoc told A/CG he hoped ConGenoffs would be able to travel to the region soon. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Mr. Quoc told A/CG that the situation in the Central Highlands was now stable, and that foreign tourists were free to "resume normal activities." He said he had asked the provincial administrations in Dak Lak, Gia Lai, and Kon Tum to once again prepare to receive a ConGen delegation as soon as possible. He thought it likely that ConGenoffs would be able to travel there soon. He also assured A/CG that the GVN was not trying to hide anything from the international community or the USG. The issue for the GVN was to be sure that it was providing accurate information. He rejected reports of demonstrations involving 150,000 Montagnards as "completely unrealistic," but commented that many people had been out on the streets to attend Easter services. As far as he was aware, there had been no deaths or serious injuries; however, he asked for more time to sort out the details, given the difficulties in communicating with remote communes and districts over a wide area. He insisted he was unable to provide any specific numbers for detentions, deaths, or injuries, saying only that some demonstrators had attacked police and been arrested. He cautioned A/CG to ignore rampant misinformation, citing as examples rumors he had heard (and dismissed) that foreign aircraft would be airlifting Montagnards from the Central Highlands to a sanctuary overseas, or that foreign delegations would soon arrive in the region to spirit the protestors away. In this context, he offered to try to provide information on specific claims regarding deaths or detentions purportedly resulting from the protests. (Note: While he seemed sincere, ERO has not always been successful in verifying information regarding sensitive cases in the past. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Mr. Quoc blamed "extremist elements" for using Easter as a pretext to "create social unrest." He also cited reports that the demonstrations may have been "instigated from outside" of Vietnam, tying in recent allegations by Cambodian officials that UNHCR was "luring" Montagnards across the border from Vietnam. Under the circumstances, he said, the government had an obligation to stop the demonstrations and preserve public order and stability. He blamed general conditions of poverty for leaving the ethnic minorities susceptible to promises of a better life overseas, and said the first obligation of the GVN with regard to human rights was to improve access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.

¶4. (SBU) Acting Consul General noted her disappointment that the GVN had postponed the joint ConGen/Embassy reporting trip to the Central Highlands planned for April 10-14 (ref C). Expressing concern over unconfirmed reports of large-scale protests that had allegedly turned violent over the weekend, A/CG emphasized the importance of immediate and reliable information to avoid the spread of unsubstantiated rumors. She also urged the GVN to grant immediate access to the region; to permit ConGenoffs to speak freely with officials and ordinary residents in the affected areas; and to assess the extent of the reported ethnic minority unrest firsthand. Speaking more generally, A/CG noted the role that freedom of speech and assembly serve in democratic societies as outlets for disenfranchised elements of the population. Reiterating the USG's respect for the national sovereignty of Vietnam, she urged the GVN to limit their investigation and not turn this into a broader inquisition.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: ERO does not always have the latest information

about the Central Highlands and ConGen is still trying to obtain better information about the protests. Mr. Quoc's description of events, while quite general, seemed to be more in line with impressions provided by ConGen sources (reflets) than with the initial stream of reports suggesting that the protests were much more widespread and violent. Many press reports today also seemed to have scaled back significantly on the numbers. ERO has worked very hard to assist the ConGen in gaining access to the Central Highlands in the past, and Mr. Quoc didn't seem to harbor any grudges over the attempt by ConGen and Embassy Poloffs to continue with their previously scheduled trip last Saturday. Even if we do get access, however, we would still expect it to be very difficult to sort things out on the ground.

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